**Evening Class**

Maeve Binchy

About the author
Maeve Binchy was born on 28 March 1940 in Dalkey, a small village outside Dublin, Ireland. She spent her childhood in Dalkey and often draws on this experience when creating the rural villages which are usually at the centre of her novels. She took a BA degree in History at University College, Dublin. She became a teacher and taught in various girls’ schools. Her teaching post at a Jewish school, and subsequent holiday in Israel, inspired her to work on a kibbutz. While abroad, Binchy wrote weekly letters to her father, describing life in a country that was constantly on the brink of war. Her father sent one of her letters to *The Irish Times*, where it was published and earned her eighteen pounds. She soon became a popular columnist on *The Irish Times* and was woman’s editor during the early days of Irish feminism. She later moved to London, where she met and married Gordon Snell, a writer and broadcaster. Maeve Binchy wrote three volumes of short stories, two plays and a television play, which won three awards at the Prague Film Festival. Her first novel *Light a Penny Candle* was published in 1982. It was an immediate success and since then she has become one of Ireland’s best-known writers. Her best-selling novels include *Echoes* (1985), *Firefly Summer* (1987), *Circle of Friends* (1990), *The Copper Beech* (1992), *The Glass Lake* (1994), *Tara Road* (1998) and *Scarlet Feather* (2001).

Summary
*Evening Class* is a story about a group of ordinary people who each have their own reasons for joining a new Italian evening class at a school in Dublin. The class is run by two people who share a passion for Italy: Aidan Dunne, a schoolteacher, and Nora O’Donoghue, whom everyone knows as Signora. Like the other members of the group, their lives are transformed as the story develops. All characters have problems and issues to resolve, and manage to do so by the end of the story, which culminates in a trip to Italy.

**Chapter 1:** Aidan, a teacher at Moutainview School, is undergoing a difficult time. His wife, Nell, and his daughters, Grania and Brigid, are becoming distant. The position of Principal at school, which he expects to be offered, is given to Tony O’Brien, a popular teacher who spends his free time at parties and with younger woman. Without anyone knowing who the other party is, Grania and Tony have been going out. Tony informs Aidan that he’s been given the job and organizes Italian evening classes under Aidan’s supervision. Garnia gets angry at Tony.

**Chapter 2:** Nora O’Donoghue, a beautiful Irish young woman, meets Mario, an Italian, in London. They fall in love, but Mario goes back to Italy to marry Gabriella, as his family has arranged. Nora moves to his town, Annunziata – where she becomes known as Signora – just to be near him. After 26 years, Mario dies in a car accident, and his widow asks Nora to leave. She returns to Dublin and rents a room at the Sullivans’s house. She is a good influence for the family, and particularly for their son, Jimmy, who goes to Mountainview School. Tony O’Brien introduces her to Aidan, who also loves Italy.

**Chapter 3:** Bill Burke works with Grania at a bank. His girlfriend, Lizzie, is a beautiful young girl interested in money and fun. Bill finds it difficult to make ends meet; he wants to help his family and tries to keep up to Lizzie’s expectations. An announcement of possible openings in the continent for young people at the bank who speak other languages leads him and Lizzie to the Italian classes. He borrows money from the bank, which he expects to pay back. When he learns that Lizzie’s mother left the family when she was a girl, he understands Lizzie better.

**Chapter 4:** At the age of 15 Lou helps thieves that have robbed his father’s shop to escape from the police, so that they do not take revenge. Robin, one of the thieves, offers that Lou join them in some ‘jobs’. Lou occasionally works for them and makes good and easy money. Some time later, while working on the robbery of a nightclub, he meets Suzi Sullivan and they fall in love. The thieves need a place for boxes to come in and go out unnoticed, so Lou joins the Italian classes, where boxes are stored in a corner. Lou gives Suzi a very expensive ring and takes an expensive TV set to the Italian classes. Signora notices what is happening and Lou promises her he will change.
Evening Class

Chapters 5–6: Connie O’Connor marries Harry Kane, a successful businessman. Following her mother’s advice, she has half her husband’s fortune under her name, in case the business goes wrong. When Harry’s company goes bankrupt, she rescues the investors, and gets utterly disappointed at her husband, who doesn’t mind about his clients and goes out with his secretary. Connie decides to take a trip to Italy and joins the Italian classes. There she meets Laddy, a humble man who lives with his nephew Gus. Gus runs a small hotel with his wife Maggie, and they have financial problems because they are Harry’s investors. Connie pays them their money and informs the police of Harry’s illegal businesses. Laddy has joined the Italian classes because an Italian guest at the hotel has thanked his honesty by inviting him to go to Italy.

Chapter 7: Fiona, Grania and Brigid’s friend, is a very shy girl, who works at the coffee shop of a hospital. There she meets Barry Healey, whose mother is in hospital. Mrs Haley is depressed because her husband pays no attention to her. Fiona gains confidence in herself as she manages to cheer Mrs Haley up, and hears from her that Mr Haley is seeing Nell, Aidan’s wife. At a party organized by the students of the Italian class, she manages to make Nell believe that Mr Haley sees a lot of women, and asks Lou to tell Mr Haley to leave Mrs Dunne alone.

Chapter 8: All students go to Italy together and have a great time. They visit the Garaldis, the Italian family that had thanked Laddy’s honesty. Signora meets one of Mario’s sons at a restaurant, who tells her that his mother has died and they had been waiting for her to come back. All the group celebrates the love its members have found with songs in English and Italian on a train trip.

Background and themes

Maeve Binchy’s novels are about ordinary people and their relationships – people the reader can always identify with. Her gift as a novelist lies in her warm portrayal of characters and her ability to show that in every life, however ordinary, lie drama, tragedy and hidden secrets.

Human relationships: In Evening Class, the new Italian class becomes a catalyst in the lives of its participants, students and teachers alike, as they come together, becoming absorbed in one another’s lives and experiencing changing and growing relationships as their class culminates in an unforgettable trip to Italy.

Evening classes are very popular in Britain and are organized as part of an Adult Education Programme in most towns and cities. Part-time classes are offered in a huge range of subjects from languages and computing to flower arranging. Classes take place in schools, colleges and community centres, and last for two hours for a period of ten weeks to two years. There is a charge for classes, but people on low incomes can often join for free. Classes are popular with people who want to meet others and find a new hobby, and for those who want to improve their knowledge and qualifications.

Ireland is the most north-westerly country in Europe, with the Atlantic Ocean to the west and the Irish Sea to the east. It is divided into thirty-two counties, including Northern Ireland. There are mountains in coastal areas and flat countryside in the middle of the country. Dublin, the capital of Ireland, is a popular tourist city with a castle, two cathedrals and a national museum and gallery.

Discussion activities

Chapter 1, pages 1–10

Before reading

1 Guess and discuss: Ask students: Aidan is not very satisfied with his life either at the school were he works or at home. Which day of the week do you think he finds the most difficult? Why? Which day of the week do you find the most difficult when you are not feeling very well?

After reading

2 Write and role play: Students imagine they are writing a theatre script based on this novel. They write a scene in which Aidan looks at an old family picture album and tells a friend about the happy old times when he and his family used to go to the country or the beach on Sundays (page 1). Then they role play their scenes.

3 Discuss: Ask students: Do you think Aidan is really satisfied with the arrangement he has made with Tony? Or is this a way he has found to feel not so bad for not having been given the job of Principal?

4 Research: Students search the Internet for information about the Department of Education in Ireland and share information about what it is and what it does.

Chapter 2, pages 10–19

Before reading

5 Guess: Ask students: In this chapter you’ll read about a love triangle in Italy. Do you think it will involve two women and a man or two men and a woman? What makes you think so?
Evening Class

After reading
6 Debate: Divide the class into two groups. Have them debate the following: *Group A:* It is Mario’s obligation to do what his family expects him to do if this is the tradition in his country. *Group B:* It is not Mario’s obligation to follow the traditions of his country. A man has to follow his heart.

7 Write: Ask students to imagine that Aidan keeps a diary where he briefly records his life. In pairs, students write his entry on the day he met Signora.

Chapter 3, pages 19–26

Before reading
8 Guess: Ask students: What do you expect the students of Italian to learn on their first class? Make a list and then check.

After reading
9 Role play: Ask students: Imagine you are Bill’s friend; he tells you that he is about to borrow more money than he should and why. What advice would you give him? Students role play their conversation.

10 Artwork and write: Tell students: The bank makes posters to inform their employees about job opportunities in European capital cities. Students make the posters with information and requirements.

11 Discuss: Ask students: Do you think it was a good idea to prepare Italian food for the students of Italian? In your opinion, how important is learning about the culture of the people whose language you are studying?

Chapter 4, pages 26–35

Before reading
12 Guess and discuss: Ask students: Suzi falls in love with a young man, who joins the Italian classes. He seems to make money too easily. What do you think Signora will do? Would you do something if you were in her place?

After reading
13 Pair work and discuss: Ask students: Do you think love and the wish to start a family may make people better? Does Lou want a change because of Suzi, or would be change anyway?

14 Artwork: Students make the ‘Buon Natalé’ cards that Lizzie and Bill, Suzie and Luigi, Signora and Aidan made for each other.

Chapters 5–6, pages 36–52

Before reading
15 Guess: Ask students: In the coming chapters you will meet somebody who decides to use her money to rescue investors who have lost their money in her husband’s company. What do you think happened to her when she was a child that led her to think that this was the right thing to do?